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ABSTRACT

The New Jersey Assembly Education Committee studied the development and administration of the New Jersey Department of Education's skills testing program. A committee meeting received testimony about the program and reviewed correspondence. The committee has found that the academic standards of the state must be raised and that a high school proficiency test is essential to this goal. Accountability, student motivation, instructional reform, and the improvement of basic skills performance are outcomes expected from the high school proficiency test. The Committee finds testing in eleventh grade to be rather late, limiting chances for remediation. Testimony on efforts to develop a high school proficiency test for the state has led the Committee to the conclusion that a commercially developed test might save the state money. A commercial test would also allow the public to see how students measure up nationally and internationally. Potential legal challenges are reviewed, and a merger of the high school proficiency test and College Basic Skills Placement Test is suggested. Establishment of a bipartisan committee on testing issues is also recommended. (SLD)

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ASSEMBLY EDUCATION COMMITTEE

REPORT ON THE

NEW JERSEY SKILLS TESTING PROGRAM

PURSUANT TO AR-113

MAY 17, 1993

ED 375 156

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INTRODUCTION

Assembly Resolution No. 113 passed the Assembly on February 25, 1993 and was filed with the Secretary of State on February 26, 1993. That resolution called for the Assembly Education Committee to "investigate the development and administration of the New Jersey Department of Education's skills testing program." The resolution also required the committee to issue a report of its findings and such recommendations as it may determine to be appropriate.

On April 19, 1993 the Assembly Education Committee held a committee meeting to receive testimony concerning the skills testing program of the Department of Education. The committee also received correspondence from interested parties concerning this issue. The testimony received at the hearing and all correspondence received by the committee has been compiled in a transcript of the committee's investigation available through the Office of Legislative Services.

BACKGROUND

P.L. 1988, c. 168 established an eleventh grade test as a requirement for high school graduation (hereafter referred to as the high school proficiency test or H.S.P.T.) beginning in the 1993-94 school year. The Legislature directed the Commissioner of Education to develop a high school proficiency test in conjunction with educators, parents, students, business and community representatives and members of minority groups. The Legislature instructed that the "test shall measure those basic skills all students must possess to function politically, economically and socially in a democratic society." The Commissioner of Education was also directed to develop and administer to all eighth grade pupils beginning in the 1990-91 school year, a test to assess progress towards mastery of State graduation proficiency standards (hereafter referred to as the early warning test or E.W.T.)

The Legislature also required local boards of education to provide remediation for pupils who fail the E.W.T. including after school, weekend and summer programs. The original legislation provided for districts to receive equalization aid and compensatory education aid for this purpose, however, this aid provision was repealed by the "Quality Education Act of 1990." The original legislation also required that remediation be given to pupils who fail the H.S.P.T. and provided compensatory education aid to school districts on a per pupil basi s for each eleventh or twelfth grade pupil who failed the H.S.P.T. This aid provision was also deleted by the "Quality Education Act of 1990." The "Quality Education Act of 1990," however, provided for the funding of these remedial programs through at-risk aid.

The legislation provided for the Joint Committee on the Public Schools to evaluate and report to the Legislature on the status of the proficiency testing program by September 1, 1990. The statute appropriated $95,000 to the joint committee for the purpose of conducting this study. It is the understanding of the committee that no study on this subject was undertaken by the joint committee during the 1990-91 legislative session and the appropriation was carried forward.

During the 1989-90 school year the Department of Education decided that in order to fulfill the statutory mandate it would develop its own H.S.P.T. and E.W.T. and formed committees to develop test specifications. The department during the test development process also determined to utilize open ended questions on both the H.S.P.T. and E.W.T.

The department formulated a budget request of 1.8 million dollars for FY 91 to support the initial development and implementation of the H.S.P.T. and E.W.T. The department received $2.3 million in FY92, $2.5 million in FY93 and has requested $4.6 million in FY94 for development and administration of the H.S.P.T.

Pursuant to the statutory timetable, the E.W.T. was administered to students for the first time in March of 1991. The department determined that for this test administration results would be interpreted using performance bands rather than a single cut score. In addition, the department determined not to anchor questions in the base test but rather a separate anchor test was created and divided into four subtests.

The E.W.T. was administered to students for the second time in March, 1992 for which a cut score was set. The Department of Education sent the scores on these tests to local school districts to be used for placement of students in remedial courses for the 1992-93 school year. Although the districts were advised not to use the test scores as the sole determinant in remedial placement it appears that many principals and superintendents around the State believed that they are compelled to place pupils who fail the E.W.T. in remediation.

Subsequently, the department discovered that approximately 9% more students fell below the reading cutoff score in the 1992 administration than in the 1991 administration. In order to determine the reason for the decline the department employed a consultant who determined that problems in the equating process might have caused the decline including the use of open ended questions in test scoring and the anchor test design. The report of the consultant was subsequently revised by the department and issued as the department's own report concerning the apparent decline in test scores.

In addition, the parents of a number of children who took the early warning test were unable to inspect the original answer sheets due to the destruction of these sheets by a subcontractor as a result of misunderstanding between the warehouser and the department.

In March of 1993 the State Board of Education in response to the problems associated with the E.W.T. issued a report wherein it concluded that the H.S.P.T. and E.W.T. are sound valid tests and that the statewide skills testing program should be supported and approved. However, the board also concluded that the department should not have attempted to equate the 1992 test results with the 1991 test results. The board indicated that it could not determine with certainty which 1992 equated cut score should be used. Therefore, districts could not rely on the cut score in order to predict with precision which students will need remediation in order to meet the H.S.P.T. standards. As a result many students were inappropriately placed in remedial or supplemental reading classes based upon the reading cut score.

FINDINGS

High School Proficiency Test

The committee finds that academic standards in the State must be raised and that a high school proficiency test is essential to this goal. A properly developed and administered H.S.P.T. will:

a. provide accountability through the public's ability to monitor the schools and exert pressure for improvement;

b. motivate students through more difficult graduation standards;

c. bring instructional reform through the alignment of the high school basic skills instruction to the graduation test;

d. stimulate improvements in our public schools by raising basic skills performance.

The committee believes that higher standards will lead to greater efforts by teachers and pupils which will lead to greater achievement.

Effect on At-Risk Pupils and Drop-Out Rates

The committee received testimony on the effects of an eleventh grade high school proficiency test on the achievement of at-risk students and the potential increase in drop-out rates in urban districts. Although "at-risk" students are not helped when they experience low standards and receive worthless diplomas, a graduation test without adequate remedial opportunities will serve only as a punishment for these pupils.

Since academic failure is often a precursor of future drop-outs, urban districts which tend to have inordinately high drop-out rates and which tend to have pupils who perform poorly on standardized tests may have significantly higher drop-out rates with the administration of an eleventh grade proficiency test. One of the major factors in this regard will be the availability of adequate remedial programs. The administration of a high school proficiency test in the eleventh grade will severely limit the opportunities for remediation for pupils who fail the test. The committee questions whether the advantages in testing pupils near the end of high school rather than at the beginning or middle outweigh the potential negative impact on at-risk pupils due to unavailability of adequate remedial opportunities. The committee is also concerned that the Department of Education has requested no funds for H.S.P.T. remediation for the 1993-94 school year.

The committee was advised by the department, however, that an additional $8 million in federal Chapter 1 funding will be allotted to New Jersey and that these funds may be used for remedial programs.

Finally, the committee acknowledges that even the availability of remedial programs may not be sufficient in some instances to address this problem but broad based reforms may be required including greater teacher contact, parental involvement and smaller class sizes.

Test Development

The committee received testimony concerning the decision of the Department of Education to develop its own basic skills test instead of utilizing a commercially available test or other forms of pupil assessment.

The department in its March, 1993 report states that commercially available tests are not viable in New Jersey because:

a. The tests are not designed to certify that New Jersey pupils have learned core course proficiencies approved by the department;

b. Commercial tests only indicate how well pupils perform against the national average of commonly taught knowledge and skills;

c. Security problems increase with the use of commercial tests;

d. The national movement is away from norm referenced tests; and

e. State control over test development, administration and scoring would be lessened.

The committee finds that although a number of the concerns expressed by the department are to some degree valid, recent improvements in commercial tests make them a viable alternative for use in New Jersey's skills testing program. A commercial test would also allow the public to see how our students measure up nationally and internationally. The committee notes that the State developed skills test only measures a narrow part of the curriculum and it should not be difficult for a commercial test to be developed which would test the same curriculum areas. The basic skills tested on the H.S.P.T. are the same skills that are taught in every state and are part of the curriculum of every state.

The committee also notes that many states have moved toward the assessment of student learning through such tools as portfolios and performance oriented tests. These forms of assessment, when combined with a more traditional test, may offer the best gauge of student learning.

The problems associated with the development and administration of the E.W.T. are indicative of problems which arise with the development of a customized test by an entity which is not in the test making business. The problems associated with the early warning test have led to significant hardships among students inappropriately placed in remedial programs through reliance on invalid test scores. The destruction of the original answer sheets also compounded the concerns of parents whose children were placed in remedial programs as a result of the E.W.T. scores. The potential for problems with the development and administration of the H.S.P.T. is even more serious given the high stakes nature of the test and the fact that validation studies and final field testing has not yet been undertaken.

Finally, the committee finds that the department has expended over $6.75 million over the past four years in developing and administering its own H.S.P.T. and that over $4.57

million has been requested for FY1994 in order to continue development and perform validation and field studies. It is likely that significant sums of new dollars will be required in future years to continue to develop, refine and validate the test. The committee finds that the use of a commercial test might have saved the State considerable tax dollars.

Potential Legal Challenges

The committee finds that the failure of the department to complete validation studies and field testing of the H.S.P.T. is troubling given the high stakes nature of the test and the fact that the first administration of the test will be in only six months.

The committee is also concerned with possible constitutional challenges to the test on equal protection grounds if the subject matter on the test was not actually taught in the classroom (instructional validity). The committee also notes that the decision of the court in Abbott v. Burke that pupils in poor urban districts were not receiving a "thorough and efficient education" may also give rise to litigation given that the H.S.P.T. was designed to measure the minimum level of learning needed as a prerequisite to a "thorough and efficient education."

The committee finally notes that a test of this nature also has the potential for cultural bias and may discriminate against vocational and business track students.

Consolidation of H.S.P.T. and College Basic Skills Placement Test

The New Jersey College Basic Skills Placement Test is administered by the Department of Higher Education and used to assist colleges in placing students in remedial college-level English and mathematics courses and to provide data on the incoming class to the Board of Higher Education.

The committee finds that both the College Basic Skills Test and the H.S.P.T. are intended to test the same skill areas, i.e. reading, writing and mathematics, and therefore, a merger of these two programs may effect considerable cost savings to the State.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The H.S.P.T. Should Be Administered Pursuant to the Statutory Timetable.

The committee believes that the H.S.P.T. is a valuable resource for assuring that a quality education is available to all children in the State. Although the committee has identified a number of problems with the development and administration of the department's skills testing program, the committee believes that the program should continue on schedule while these problems are examined and rectified.

2. A Bipartisan Commission Should Be Formed to Study Testing Issues.

The committee recommends that a bipartisan commission be formed to conduct a study of the skills testing program of the Department of Education. The study should focus on the issues raised by this committee report including the:

a. viability of the use of a commercial test;

b. use of alternative forms of assessment such as portfolios and performance based tests;

c. administration of the H.S.P.T. in the 10th grade to allow more time for remediation;

d. adequacy of existing remedial programs for those who fail the test and the sufficiency of State funding for these programs.

3. The H.S.P.T. and College Basic Skills Placement Test Could Be Consolidated.

The committee recommends that the Commissioner of Education and Chancellor of Higher Education examine whether the High School Proficiency Test and the College Basic Skills Test should be combined into one program under the auspices of the Department of Education.